

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, January 26, 1879, with transcript

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL TO MABEL (Hubbard) BELL 339 Marlborough St., Boston. Sunday, January 26th, 1879. Mrs. Bell, 1509 R. I. Ave., Washington, D. C. You poor dear little wife:

What a catalogue of woes your letter contains! — no wonder I had to wait so long for a letter from home!

Mr. Senator Morgan and the water-filter — and your poor unfortunate purse! Well! I don't know that I am surprised or sorry about the purse so long as you have not lost much — for I have been expecting such a mishap indeed sometimes most wickedly hoping for it! for months past — There! I won't go on any more — for anyone is liable to have his pocket picked — and it may be fortunate that you had not cashed the cheque. But as to your attempting to lift that water-filter — well I can't allow myself to say more — and I won't say anything more about it excepting to hope you have not hurt yourself. My darling how could you try your strength in that way. I don't see how it could fall without hurting you and you don't say a word about it. You wouldn't keep anything from me — would you dear? I can't bear to think of you being alone in Washington — but the thought that you may have hurt yourself and have said nothing about it to me troubles me. I send you another cheque for twenty dollars and one payable to Messrs. Fitch Fox and Cutter for ninety dollars. I have just remembered that we came into the house on the 23rd of December and so the next month's rent will probably be due on the 23rd of January instead of the 1st of February. If the bill has been presented you better send down and pay it at once.

You should not have paid Willie anything at all for shovelling up the coal, as he is in our employ — please don't pay him anything more till I come home. I made a special arrangement with him. While I write this letter my face is suffused with blushes! I am

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blushing like a young girl and feel my skin burning down to my shoulders! Not that I have been doing any guilty act of which I am ashamed — but simply because I have been reading a chapter in Darwin's "Expression of the Emotions" entitled "Blushing" — I have been reading so much about "Blushing" during the last half-hour — that now by a process of mental re-action I find my face tingling and I have no doubt that were I to look in a mirror — I would find it crimson.

Yesterday, Mr. Chauncey Smith opened his case on our behalf — and I was so delighted with the admirable tact shown by Mr. Smith and his "expert" witness that I telegraphed my satisfaction last night.

You know that I have always placed great reliance upon what I term the "Undulatory current of Electricity" and which I believe to be the real basis of the Speaking Telephone.

A number of the claims in my first patent are based upon methods of producing undulatory currents and Mr. Smith and I have been having a regular pitched battle in regard to the importance of these claims. I really have been made ill by the worry and annoyance of Mr. Smith's seeming lack of appreciation of what I believe to be the fundamental underlying feature of the speaking Telephone. I recognize however that Mr. Smith's course so far has been a wise one.

In answer to our complaint of Infringement — our opponents filed what was termed a Bill of Objections — claiming that the invention had been made long before I was born. A critical examination of the references to old books and patents — showed that the defense of our opponents was based entirely upon the idea of seeking to prove that my 3 methods of producing undulatory currents were old and that the undulatory current was old — and Mr. Smith said that however original the undulatory current might be, and however original the methods of producing it might be — we could not support our claims to infringement (if our action was based upon the originality of the undulatory current) — without an interminable controversy — the result of which would be very uncertain. He said however that if we

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abandoned theory and relied simply upon the machine shown —“A Speaking Telephone” — and based our claim that our patents had been infringed — simply upon those claims that described apparatus for transmitting and reproducing speech electrically, we had solid ground to stand upon — and the very simplicity of the apparatus would lead to the speedy solution of the suit.

He stated also that as our opponents relied solely and exclusively upon upsetting my claims to the methods of producing undulatory currents — and had given no references at all to any apparatus for transmitting and reproducing the sounds of articulate speech — our exclusive reliance upon this apparatus would upset all their theories of defense — and have all the effect of opening upon the enemy a heavy fire from a masked battery. Our attack coming from an entirely unexpected quarter.

They have stated in their Bill of Objections — that my invention was old — and they have referred to a whole library of books containing it. How it turns out to their astonishment — that the invention they have stated to be old — is not the invention we claim they have infringed and they don't know what to do. Messrs. Brown, Baldwin and Pope — counsel on the other side — were quite unable to commence the cross-examination of our expert — and have 4 flown down to New York for advice and counsel from headquarters there. Mr. Smith has taken the ground completely from under their feet.

He does not propose to assert infringement of our patents in this suit — on the ground of producing undulatory currents in the ways I have claimed — but simply on the ground of using an apparatus for the transmission and reproduction of vocal sounds — such apparatus being substantially identical with the apparatus shown by me in my patents and claimed by me.

I never saw men so taken aback and surprised as when Mr. Smith finished his short examination of Mr. Renwick and said, “Gentlemen — that is all.” They must do something on Monday morning but at present they are utterly nonplussed. They have collected a

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great deal of war material and have their cannon planted and their men distributed in position in expectation of our attack. Now to their surprise they find they have been waiting and preparing for an attack that is not to be made — and a sudden assault has been made in an unexpected quarter — and in the most feebly protected spot. Before they can have time to change their front — and before they can bring any cannon to bear upon us the chances are their fort will be taken — and we will be in possession of the ground we want.

I admire exceedingly the way in which Mr. Renwick gave his testimony — treading all the while on firm grounds and avoiding marshy or uncertain places — I recognize the fact that no scientific man that I know — could have given testimony in every way so valuable to us — and so little assailable to the enemy. All the same it is. My private opinion however that the man is no gentlemen and I would not trust him further than a hundred dollar bill could reach him. I think I have written about enough for one letter and shall stop. With fond love to you and little Elsie — and to all on 14th Street.

Your loving husband, Alec.